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ABSTRACT

Educators who write documents or journal articles want to have their writing read and cited. To achieve this today, educators need to produce writings that are easily accessible through computerized searching (online and on compact disk) in databases. The trend toward end-users doing their own computerized information retrieval has caused database vendors to make changes that ease end-user frustration. In addition, writers can control certain components of the writing process to meet the goal of making their writing more easily located via computerized bibliographic or full-text database searching by end-users and intermediaries. Writers can (1) have a clear and unambiguous title, (2) provide a narrative abstract or annotation, (3) cite authors' names in a consistent format, (4) select appropriate words for the title and abstract, and (5) furnish an informative document title page. (YLB)

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Judith Gwinn Adrian
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PROCEDURES FOR WRITERS IN THE FIELD OF ADULT EDUCATION: HOW TO MAKE YOUR WRITINGS MORE CONSISTENTLY ACCESSIBLE WITHIN COMPUTERIZED INFORMATION DATABASES

Abstract: Educators writing documents or journal articles desire to have their writing read and cited. Today, as a part of achieving this end, the writings need to be easily accessible through computerized searching (online and cd-rom) in databases such as ERIC. There are specific techniques for achieving this. The trend toward end-users doing their own computerized information retrieval and the implications this has for educational writers are discussed in this article; and hints are given for writers in the field of education on: 1) Having a clear and unambiguous title, 2) Providing a narrative abstract or annotation, 3) Citing authors' name(s) in a consistent format, 4) Selecting appropriate words for the title and abstract, 5) Furnishing an informative document title page.

* * *

In adult education, as in other fields, we are feeling the effects of what John Naisbitt defined as the Information Society. (Naisbitt, p. 11) As increasing amounts of information are available to educators, the problem becomes one of access to appropriate information and, for the writer, the question becomes: how can I make the document or journal article or dissertation I am writing most easily accessible to all who will use it in their practice, their research, their teaching?

THE INCREASING NUMBER OF "END-USERS"

Computer-assisted bibliographic searching is becoming a matter of fact for educators. Progressively, more practitioners and/or researchers are using the database systems themselves to gain access to information. The database producers call these people "end-users" as opposed to "intermediaries" - the information specialists, reference librarians, etc. Dialog, the largest of the database vendors, surveyed their customers in 1986. Of the 75,000 users, 85% were intermediaries. However, there were 18,000 new sign-ups during the year and 80% of that group were end-users, i.e. people doing their own searching. (Summit, pp. 62-63)

There are a variety of reasons for this expansion in the number of end-users. The availability of microcomputers and modems is a major one. Low cost, even free access to databases, such as ERIC on CD-ROM (the entire collection of ERIC, updated quarterly, is available on compact disks through some university libraries at little or no direct cost) is another. A further reason for

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expansion in the number of end-users is the increasing variety and specialization of databases and the progressively greater number of full-text articles available online; full-text databases being more able to provide some of the answers an end-user is seeking, rather than just the sources or citations that may lead to these answers. Ironically, it requires a greater understanding of the concepts of computerized searching to locate information in full-text databases than it does to search the bibliographic databases like ERIC that do not provide for searching of the complete text of articles or documents.

FRUSTRATIONS END-USERS MAY ENCOUNTER

End-users are often, at least initially, unfamiliar with the use of controlled vocabulary and the concepts of Boolean logic used by professional searchers to locate information on computer accessed databases. They may be frustrated as the number and variety of databases increases. Determining which is the most appropriate database(s) takes time. In the field of adult education, for example, documents and articles from psychology, sociology, business, medicine and possibly other fields are pertinent, as well as those in the various education-oriented databases. And, once the most appropriate databases for a given topic are located, a well designed search strategy in one database is generally not transferable to another. While some databases, like ERIC, use controlled vocabulary to index their articles, others rely on subject catagories or other codes to index the writings. It is possible to search free-text in databases asking the computer to search for specified words or numbers appearing any place in the article record: e.g. the title, the descriptors, the abstract. The results of such a search, however, are likely to be less comprehensive than the findings of a well organized search using the searching tools developed for each of the databases.

Also, beginning searchers may not realize that many databases include few books or copyrighted materials in their collections. ERIC, for example, does not include commercial hard-bound books. Additionally, copyright restrictions on some materials prohibit reproduction of the writings. Of the ERIC collection, 1 1/2% of their approximately 600,000 documents and articles fall into the category of copyright restricted materials. Such writings are selected for inclusion, however, when it is determined they make a major contribution to the field of education. Reproductions of these writings are unavailable through the ERIC system. (ERIC)

DATABASE VENDORS ARE WORKING TO EASE END-USER FRUSTRATIONS

There are changes taking place with the database vendors that will assist end-users in searching. For example, the BRS Colleague system now provides a practice service on subsets of four databases in the medical and business areas at a lessened cost to encourage practice of search techniques. (BRS, p. 99) Online help is also available with this system (p. 68) as are the

new features of automatic searching for plurals so that when the end-user enters the word child, child and children are both automatically entered. (p. 24) A further example within the BRS system is the database, TERM, which lists "controlled vocabulary, category codes, subject codes, free-text synonyms and near synonyms for concepts in the social and behavioral sciences." (BRS, Aidpage, 1-88) These sorts of responses to end-user frustrations will, I think, increase the general use of the online systems, allowing greater access to specific educational documents and articles.

* * *

WHAT COMPONENTS OF THE WRITING PROCESS CAN THE WRITER CONTROL IN ORDER TO MEET THE GOAL OF BEING MORE EASILY LOCATED VIA COMPUTERIZED BIBLIOGRAPHIC OR FULL-TEXT DATABASE SEARCHING BY END-USERS AND INTERMEDIARIES?

1) CREATING A CLEAR AND UNAMBIGUOUS TITLE. Titles serve as the primary retrieval system for selection of relevant citations. An intermediary will locate articles or documents on a given subject and freely give the researcher a listing of titles, because, usually, a list of titles can be printed at a lower cost than a list of complete document/article citations and abstracts or annotations.

A novice end-user is likely to search free-text, essentially requesting that the computer look for the designated words (whether these are descriptors or jargon or plain language) in all relevant fields: the title field, the descriptor field and the abstract/annotation field. Again, it is likely that the first method used for selecting articles or documents that are relevant will be the apparent appropriateness of the title.

A useful title is one that is descriptive and gives concise information on the article or other writings, often with further explanation or detail of the main idea in a subtitle. (Isn't it written someplace that titles in education must include a semi-colon?) Depending on the nature of the article (research, editorial, etc.), the questions of what, how, who, where, and when are often asked in the searching process. Those that are pertinent should be answerable from the title. A title that gives insufficient information or that is overly innovative will not provide the necessary content clues and may well be ignored by the intermediary or end-user.

John Dobson researched the problems of searching in the ERIC database for relevant professional journal articles on evaluation in adult education. He found that most titles could answer the question "what" kind of evaluation took place and "how" the research was conducted. The answers to "who" and "where" appeared less often, and "why" and "when" were seldom answerable from the title. (Dobson, p. 10)

2) PROVIDING A NARRATIVE ABSTRACT OR ANNOTATION. The abstract or annotation is another crucial factor in the selection of a document or journal article. On most computer-accessed databases, these synopses expand the information the searcher or the end-user has about the article well beyond what can be obtained through reading the title and the descriptors. (Not all databases abstract or annotate their documents or journal articles.)

The abstract/annotation should include a statement of the problem, procedures used, findings and conclusions, as applicable to the subject of the article. Additional information, beyond that in the title, on what, how, who, where and when would increase the chances of relevant articles being located by researchers using computerized searching. Also, if there is an extensive reference section in the article or document, this should be mentioned in the abstract.

ERIC writes 200 word abstracts for documents and 50 word annotations for journal articles. Authors are encouraged to write their own abstracts or annotations which ERIC may then use unchanged, may modify, or may not use at all if they are judged inadequate. The chances are that any such author contributions will be used in one way or another. (ERIC)

For example, the abstract for this document could be rewritten as a 50 word annotation in the following way:

> Educational reports, articles for professional/scholarly journals, and dissertations are often located with computerized searching (online/CD-ROM) by end-users. This article gives five suggestions on writing procedures that allow more consistent information retrieval: 1) clear, unambiguous title; 2) narrative abstract/annotation; 3) consistent format for names; 4) word selection; 5) informative title page.

3) CITING AUTHORS' NAME(S) IN A CONSISTENT FORMAT. This will alleviate the problem in computer searching on a single database of missing some articles by one author because of variations in the use of a name. A search for writings by Cyril Houle will not necessarily turn up articles written by Cy Houle unless the searcher knows how to truncate the author's name (ask for various possible alternative spellings).

However, this is also an area where the writer does not have full control since the databases have varying criteria for use of authors' names and some will rewrite a name to meet their requirements. (ERIC records personal names exactly as written on the document or article.) If you have a relatively common first and last name, you may want to use your full middle name, even a pen name, to make your name more unusual!

4. SELECTING APPROPRIATE WORDS FOR TITLE AND ABSTRACT. A professional searcher will use both descriptors and ordinary language in combination to locate an article. A beginning end-user is more likely to ignore the descriptors and use the common, possibly the faddish language within the field of adult education. In the annotation example given under #2 above, the words or phrases "online", "CD-ROM", "end-users" and "information retrieval" were specifically chosen for inclusion because they are in current usage and could increase the chances of this writing being located by someone searching free-text.

By using a limited number of "buzz words" and common terms in the abstract or annotation a writer acknowledges the dynamic development of language usage taking place in the field of education and provides one additional pathway for searchers to locate her/his writings. However, these same words will gradually become obsolete and ineffective as a method of retrieval in future years. Writers need to find a balance in the use of faddish language to aid both current and future searchers.

Language in adult education and in the social sciences in general is a problem for computer searchers. For example, a search for "Training in terminal care" will produce very different results in a database on computers than it will in a medical database. Or the word "system" meaning a plan or scheme in both education and medicine has an additional physiological meaning in medicine related to body systems such as the circulatory system. It is important to consider the various meanings of words within other disciplines where your article may have relevance when writing the title and abstract of an article or document. A significant number of writings appear in more than one database.

ERIC encourages writers to submit suggestions for descriptors for their writings, even if the words are not currently used in the ERIC Thesaurus. (ERIC)

5) FURNISHING AN INFORMATIVE DOCUMENT TITLE PAGE. The producers of the ERIC database have specific information they hope to see on a document title page. The availability of this information to their abstractors allows the document to be more completely indexed, again increasing the likelihood of the publication being located in a computerized search. The specific information they request, when applicable, is:

a) Title/subtitle
b) Personal author(s)
c) Preparing institution
d) Sponsoring agency
e) Publication date (this is different from the quarterly, interim or final report dates that would be included for a research report. If the document is a report on a contract, it should specify the inclusive dates covered by the report.)
f) Report number

g) Contract number
h) Series information.

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Adult educators need to be aware of the dramatic changes taking place in the field of information technology and the ways we can implement this technology into our writing as well as draw on it in our planning, our classrooms, and our evaluations. Adult educators, even more than other professionals, must, I believe, be technologically proactive. We need to be involved in new technologies, thinking of how they can be innovatively used in educational situations and then acting on these normative ideas.

By consciously using the procedures for writers mentioned above, we as writers in adult education can increase our chances of being effectively located within computerized databases, and thereby expand the audience for, and potentially the use of, our information, knowledge and ideas.

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